

A condo plan suffers an art attack

A Queen West artist puts his spin on a flashy ad's 'bohemian' poster girl

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The vacant-looking Brobdingnagian brunette poster girl has been looming over a sizable chunk of Queen Street West all summer, doing her best to promote a condo development called Bohemian Embassy.

With one hand on her hip and one holding a rose, the braided model shows off a cacophonous ensemble, which includes -- but is not limited to -- heavy makeup, a black fishnet top, patterned bell sleeves, an ambassadorial sash, a poor-boy hat, beads and a crucifix.

Now, across the street, residents and habitués of the neighbourhood are doing double takes in front of the scruffy window of Fly Gallery. Local artist Michael Toke has staged a satirical look-alike poster and 16-minute video installation dubbed Bohemian Embarrassment, in which the aloof bohémienne (actually, his wife, Andrea Battersby, doing an eerily bang-on impression of the woman in the original) swigs red wine, sways and acts, well, aloof.

The piece was installed on Aug. 1 and is now on-line at <http://www.bohemianembarrassment.ca>.



Mr. Toke says he just couldn't ignore his visceral dislike of the condo development's image and the use of the term "bohemian" in the name. Intended or not, it's a reference to the legendary 1960s Toronto hippie coffee house of the same name.

Mr. Toke happened to be in the midst of an art project called *Bohemian Rhapsody in Blue*, documenting the detritus left behind by prostitutes and homeless people in the patch of land behind his loft building (which itself is slated for redevelopment), when Baywood Homes' notion of bohemian collided with his own.

"It was immediate," he says, standing over a cutting board in his Abell Street studio. "I just couldn't believe they wanted to call [the condo development] that. And I wondered who they were trying to attract. It's like they were saying, 'Come here for culture in the neighbourhood.' Somebody had to say something."

Originally, he considered graffiti, but as more posters went up, he deemed the job too large for even a stealthy artist. And for the record, he's not against development, per se, nor is he a member of local activist groups.

"I understand where the neighbourhood is going," he says. "It's just the marketing itself. It needed a rebuttal."

So, after thinking about it for about a month, he spent a day shopping at the dollar store and then a few minutes behind a sewing machine.

The silent video was shot in two takes on July 31.

"I wanted to add some depth, a little drunken angst. I wanted [the woman] to have been up for hours, working and drinking, arguing or crying. But still indifferent." The text on the poster tweaks the original. "Flats & lofts" becomes "Cons & lies." Baywood becomes Fauxwood. Baywood has not contacted Mr. Toke, nor did it return calls to The Globe and Mail for comment.

Mr. Toke, 42, acknowledges that he has tapped into the uneasy relationship many local artists have with the notion of gentrification and appropriating the art scene to sell condos. Tongues are still wagging after the developers of the Westside lofts, just east of the Bohemian Embassy, bought up art by area artists to offer buyers as a gift-with-purchase.

But the use of the term "bohemian" to market condos is more irksome to Mr. Toke.

"It doesn't take long to see what is basically cashing in on the neighbourhood," he says. "Everyone finds it insulting. What demographic wants to be part of an artists' society but wouldn't be offended by that poster? Anybody who really likes art thinks it's shallow."